

University of Glasgow  
MA (Hons) History  
Dissertation

*0806402 - February 2012*

**Blackshirts in Red Scotland:  
an analysis of fascism and its opponents in  
inter-war Scotland**

*Words: 13,000*

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## Chapter One

### Introduction: a missing narrative of inter-war Scotland

The radical and working class history of Scotland is, on the surface, well documented. In particular, the ‘Red Clydeside’ period, when Glasgow and the surrounding region became a locus for unrest and political radicalism lasting from roughly 1911 to the early 1930s, is one of the most widely written about and theorised periods of Scottish history.

The emergence of ‘Red Clydeside’ cannot be isolated from the revolutionary upsurge that swept across Europe towards the latter stages of the First World War; with industrial unrest and workers’ uprisings across the continent, from Petrograd to Bavaria and Limerick to Turin. Yet the failure of these revolutions – with the obvious exception of the Bolsheviks in Russia – would create a political vacuum that would, over the course of a decade, allow for the rise of fascism.<sup>1</sup> This was a European-wide phenomenon that has provoked widespread fascination, as both a subject of academic study and also one which holds a great political and cultural resonance that endures to this day.

Like most European states, Britain was not immune to this trend, and witnessed the growth, albeit an uneven one, of fascist organisations through the inter-war period. This would peak in the summer of 1934 when the British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Oswald Mosley and supported by sections of the British ruling class, were able to place membership figures around the 40,000 mark.<sup>2</sup> The ‘storm centre’ of British fascism would prove to be the East End of London, the scene of showpiece BUF rallies as well as the ‘Battle of Cable Street’, a major confrontation between the police and anti-fascists over the route of a BUF march in 1936.<sup>3</sup> Correspondingly, most of the historiography of British fascism focuses on this geographical area and on the phenomenon of Mosley

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for the rise of fascism across Europe are obviously far more complex than simply the failure of communist insurrections 1918-23, but this was certainly a factor: in Italy, Mussolini’s Blackshirts were initially employed to crush labour unrest before arriving in power, while the anti-communist paramilitary Freikorps in Germany would go on to form a backbone of NSDAP support.

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, Keith *Fighting Fascism: the British Left and the Rise of Fascism, 1919-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p125

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, Neil ‘The anti-fascist movement in south-east Lancashire, 1933-40: the divergent experiences of Manchester and Nelson’ *Opposing Fascism* Kirk & McElligot, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p48

himself, a charismatic figure with an aristocratic background and perhaps the closest we ever saw to a 'British Hitler'.<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, in the very extensive general literature surrounding Red Clydeside and Scottish working class history of this era, the place of anti-fascism inside Scotland is, at best, a footnote. While it's true that much focus has been given to the Scottish anti-fascist volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War, something which is remembered and celebrated by the Scottish labour movement to this day, a tendency exists to overlook events on the domestic front. General histories released in recent years – including Maggie Scott's *When the Clyde Ran Red*<sup>5</sup> and William Kenefick's *Red Scotland!*<sup>6</sup> neglect to mention fascism in Scotland at all. Equally, studies of British fascism – which are numerous – pay little attention to events north of the border or, in actuality, those outside of London. Ostensibly, there is good reason for this; with hindsight, most historians can conclude that the BUF never seriously came close to threatening the existing social order in Britain, let alone Scotland. But the impact that the BUF had on the inter-war political sphere, the 'scale and intensity' of their operations, is still a contested area of debate.<sup>7</sup> While a tendency to downplay the threat they posed vis-à-vis their counterparts in mainland Europe is no doubt legitimate, the very existence of fascist organisations showed the *potential* threat that existed, something that those who actively opposed them were keenly aware of.

Specific study of fascism within inter-war Scotland has not entirely eluded historians of this period however, but is limited to a few academic articles, through which a small school of debate has emerged over the past two decades. Works by Henry Maitles, Stephen M. Cullen and Tony Milligan have looked at the role played by the BUF in Scotland, particularly focusing on the question of their failure. Daniel Gray's recent, comprehensive exploration of the links between Scotland and the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Caledonia*, also delves briefly into the fight against home grown fascism, while Kibblewhite and Rigby have carried out a detailed monograph of anti-fascism in 1930s Aberdeen. Furthermore, some studies of Red Clydeside have dipped into looking at the reaction of the extra-parliamentary right – the term 'fascist' must be used with

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<sup>4</sup> Mosley was described as such on the cover of *Time* magazine (16 March 1931)

<sup>5</sup> Scott, Maggie *When The Clyde Ran Red* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Kenefick, William *Red Scotland!* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> Hodgson *Fighting Fascism* (2010), p137

some caution – to labour militancy.<sup>8</sup> Across literature, and indeed popular culture, references to the ‘Brighton Billy Boys’, a Protestant gang led by Billy Fullerton in the East End of Glasgow, abound, yet details of their exploits seem to be thin on the ground.<sup>9</sup>

If it’s true that fascism has been largely missed out from studies of inter-war Scotland due to the relatively minimal impact it made, then this raises further questions of precisely why fascism failed to take off in Scotland – and to an extent Britain – when it could flourish elsewhere. But nonetheless, fascist organisations did exist and grow in Scotland during this time, and they were vehemently opposed by sections of society, including many in the rank and file of the labour movement – communists, Jewish workers and others – for whom the menace of fascism was a very real and credible threat.

Scotland presents a particularly interesting context in which to study the pan-European trend of the rise of fascism in the two decades following the First World War. On the ground, several factors existed which would, on a simplistic level, seemingly lay down conditions to aid the growth of fascism: a working class divided along religious lines, mass cross-class organisations dedicated to upholding the ‘rights’ and ‘traditions’ of a particular ethno-religious group and a ruling class of which elements would make overtures towards fascism. Yet the relationship between organised extreme Protestantism and fascism in Scotland was incredibly complex. Of the groups which existed, with varying levels of militancy from mass organisations like the Orange Order to the extremes of the Scottish Protestant League, their relationship with ‘fascism’, and equally the trade union movement and far-left organisations, was often in itself contradictory and confused. On the other side of this divide, many Catholics and the descendents of Irish immigrants – often the victims of prejudice and bigotry in Scotland – were part of an institution, the Catholic Church, that vocally supported the fascists in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>10</sup> Conflicting views over the Irish question even within the fascist right further complicated matters. Thus it becomes impossible to paint either side in

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<sup>8</sup> McIvor, Arthur & Paterson, Hugh ‘Combating the Left: Victimisation and Anti-Labour Activities on Clydeside, 1900-1939’ in *Militant Worker: Labour & Class Conflict on the Clyde 1900-1950s* Duncan & McIvor, eds. (Edinburgh: John McDonald Ltd, 1992), pp129-154

<sup>9</sup> McKay, Reg ‘Razor gangs ruled the streets, but even in the violence of the pre-war years, one man stood out’ *Daily Record* (19 October 2007)

<sup>10</sup> Gray, Daniel *Homage to Caledonia: Scotland & the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2008), p125

black and white terms. Ultimately, the ‘conventional’ fascist organisations in Scotland failed to tap into the existing bigotry that, apparently, wide sections of the population were open to – why was this the case?

The future of Europe was in flux in the period following the First World War – and Scotland was no different. By viewing the rise of fascism within the context of inter-war Scotland – labour militancy and ‘Red Scotland’, the blight of sectarian conflict, Protestant extremism, and the emergence of Scottish nationalism – I will examine how successful fascist organisation was and why this was the case. In particular, I will focus on the role that the activity of anti-fascists, largely drawn from the ranks of far-left organisations, played in preventing fascism from gaining a foothold in Scotland – somewhat of a missing narrative from the well-worn stories of Red Clydeside and the inter-war labour movement in Scotland.

The research method for this study has largely involved looking at newspapers from the relevant period. While newspaper such as *The Scotsman*, *The Herald* and *The Times* have been used, of particular use has been those periodicals which catered to a more niche market, including *Forward*, the primary organ of the Scottish left at this time and published by the Independent Labour Party, and the *Jewish Echo*, produced by Glasgow’s Jewish community. For an opposing take on events, publications of the British Union of Fascists – primarily their weekly newspaper, *The Blackshirt* – have also been consulted. Police records and correspondence between local and national government officials from the time, held in the Scottish National Archives, have also proved useful when looking into street disturbances. Ideally oral history could have been carried out, which judging from interviews carried out by historians over the past few decades on the subject, would have been highly valuable. However, due to the time period of the events discussed – seventy to eighty years ago – this was unfortunately not possible.

## Chapter Two

### Fascism and xenophobia in post-war Scotland

There can be little doubt that British fascism peaked with the sudden, and fairly short-lived, surge in support for the BUF in the mid-1930s. But this support had not arisen spontaneously: the preceding years provide us with numerous examples of bigotry, anti-immigrant hostility and racism across society, including in Scotland.

It is not widely known that in the same month as the celebrated Forty Hours Strike in 1919, when English tanks occupied the centre of Glasgow and which culminated at the 'Battle of George Square',<sup>1</sup> the city also witnessed violent anti-black rioting. On this occasion, on 23 January 1919, tensions among dock workers at the Broomielaw over the 'employment of Chinese and alien coloured seamen on British ships' spilled over into a battle with sailors from Sierra Leone, with 'revolvers and knives' used and several shots fired.<sup>2</sup> The role of the two seamen's unions on the Broomielaw was essentially of deep-seated hostility to immigrant labour, which they saw as driving down wages and conditions.<sup>3</sup> Shipping companies did exploit the differentiation in wages between white and African workers, yet it's unclear if much attempt was made to challenge this by the organised left or from within the labour movement. While the disturbance did receive some coverage in the mainstream Scottish press, it was ignored by *Forward* – perhaps because it paled in significance to the iconic events of the following week, but perhaps also due to embarrassment at the manner in which Scottish workers had treated their fellow seamen. Another left-wing newspaper printed in Glasgow, the Socialist Labour Party's *The Socialist*, later in 1919 featured an article about trade unions and race relations, yet did not make any specific reference to the city nor the events of January in its appeal for unity 'against the capitalist class'.<sup>4</sup>

While the significance of the 1919 race riot should perhaps not be overstated, it does provide a neat counterbalance to the mythologised vision of heroic Red Clydeside, and shows that the ideas of reaction and bigotry could often be just as powerful as those of solidarity and class unity. It also must be made clear that it was not a manifestation of

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<sup>1</sup> McShane, Harry *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto, 1978) ,p107

<sup>2</sup> *The Scotsman*, 24 January 1919, p4

<sup>3</sup> Jenkinson, Jacqueline 'The Glasgow Race Disturbances of 1919' *Race and Labour in Twentieth Century Britain* Ed. Lunn, Kenneth (London: Frank Cass & Company, 1985), p58

<sup>4</sup> *The Socialist*, 10 July 1919 in Jenkinson (1985), p47

the far-right in itself, but rather demonstrated the potential for such ideas to take hold. It would be several years before a movement that could articulate xenophobia into a political programme would emerge. However, early incarnations of fascism would prove to have little success in 1920s Scotland.

Mussolini concluded his march to power in Italy in 1922, and Scottish imitations did not take long to formulate themselves. As much cultural institutions as they were political, members of Scotland's expatriate Italian community established branches of Mussolini's National Fascist Party, running clubhouses, sports events and so on. These branches grew to such an extent that by 1933 almost half of all Italian Scots were members, yet their scope was limited to cultural activity and they did not make any formal links to British fascist organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Sympathy for Mussolini, however, spread beyond just Scotland's Italian migrant community. Many in the upper echelons of Scottish society had great respect for a man who had arrived in power having crushed the left following the country's tumultuous 'Red Years'.<sup>6</sup> It should therefore not be of any great surprise that it was an aristocratic figure, the Earl of Glasgow, who oversaw the establishment of the British Fascists (BF) in Scotland and provided them with a headquarters in Glasgow. The BF was the first fascist organisation in Britain, initially called the 'British Fascisti' in homage to their Italian counterparts. The main focus of the BF was one of virulent opposition to communism, of which anti-semitism was a component. Their membership card stated their basic principles, of opposition to communists who are 'in the pay of the Soviets of Russia' and determined to 'murder' the present ruling class and replace them with a cabal of 'Jews and Fanatics'. A list of fascist 'pledges' is on the reverse side of the card, with members promising to 'support the King and the British constitution', 'end class hatred', act and think like 'a Christian' and 'to join my fellow Fascists in opposing [communist] force by force if and when it becomes necessary'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cullen, Stephen 'The Fasces and the Saltire: the Failure of the British Union of Fascists in Scotland, 1932-1940' *The Scottish Historical Review* Vol. 87 No. 2 (October 2008), p327

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Membership Card, British Fascists (photograph) in Maitles, Henry 'Confronting Fascism: Attitudes of the Glasgow Jewish Community in the 1930s' *The Local Historian* Vol. 27 No. 2 (May 1997, British Association for Local History), p106



The BF were, though, ‘riven by internal divisions’ and struggled to get off the ground.<sup>8</sup> In 1926, the movement split over what attitude to take towards the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), a reactionary, semi-official grouping formed to counter the effectiveness of a general strike. In October 1925, Patrick Ford, Unionist MP for Edinburgh North addressed a local meeting at which *The Scotsman* reports he discussed the OMS and whether members of the British Fascists should be allowed to participate:

“Mr Ford said that the British Fascisti, to his mind, were not much use, because they always seemed to clash with the communists and had to call in the police. He could not help, in the first place, having some suspicion of people whose initials were ‘B.F.’ (Laughter). On the other hand he did not see why Fascists should not be enrolled as Special Constables if they were, as they seemed to be, men of good character”<sup>9</sup>

Here we can see an establishment figure acknowledging that the British Fascists may hold some usefulness in putting down social unrest, provided that they do so within an official capacity. Yet he still plays down any impact they could have and feels the need to mock them, fitting with a prevailing attitude that the BF were little more than ‘Boy Scout fascists’<sup>10</sup>, hardly comparable to the might of Mussolini who commanded respect among much of Britain’s ruling classes.

For fascists across the country, the general strike of May 1926 was, as their preparations showed, long awaited, and they saw it as a chance for them to step in and ‘save the country’.<sup>11</sup> However, the strike was called off after just a few days and did not lead to the chaotic scenes of social breakdown which many fascists had envisaged. Just prior to the strike, the Earl of Glasgow led a split off in favour of co-operating with the OMS, the ‘quasi-fascist’ Scottish Loyalists, who claimed to possess 2000 supporters.<sup>12</sup> The programme of the Scottish Loyalists was much the same as their previous incarnation, the BF (indeed, *The Scotsman* simply referred to it as a ‘change of title’<sup>13</sup>): strident anti-communism, the elimination of ‘class hatred’ and the upholding of the ‘tenets of

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<sup>8</sup> Milligan, Tony ‘The British Union of Fascists’ Policy in Relation to Scotland’ *Scottish Economic and Social History* Vol. 19 No 1 pp.1-17 (May 1999, Edinburgh University Press) p2

<sup>9</sup> *The Scotsman* (9 October 1925), p5

<sup>10</sup> Pugh, Martin *Hurrah for the Blackshirts! Fascists and Fascism in Britain Between the Wars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p51

<sup>11</sup> Pugh, Martin (2005), p92

<sup>12</sup> Maitles, Henry ‘Blackshirts Across the Border: the BUF in Scotland’ *The Scottish Historical Review* Vol. 82 No. 1 (April 2003), p93

<sup>13</sup> *The Scotsman* (7 May 1926), p4

Christianity'.<sup>14</sup> Billy Fullerton, leader of the 400-strong<sup>15</sup> 'Bridgeton Billy Boys' Protestant razor gang, was a member and is alleged to have received 'a medal for strike breaking'<sup>16</sup> from Glasgow city council. The Scottish Loyalists, however, failed to have much of an impact throughout the rest of the 1920s and the Earl of Glasgow spent much of the rest of the decade in France, having been bankrupted by his Scottish estates.<sup>17</sup> He did address a Loyalists public meeting in St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow in April 1929, sharing a platform with a Unionist MP and speaking on a familiar theme of the threat of an impending 'Socialist Government' and the need for 'class friendship'.<sup>18</sup> The Earl of Glasgow would remain a peripheral figure in British fascism throughout the 1930s.

But while fascist parties may have struggled to find their two feet in Scottish society during the 1920s, other organisations grounded in ostensibly similar ideas – ethno-religious supremacism, vehement hostility to a particular minority group, conspiracy theories, anti-establishment populism and an inclination to use political violence and 'shock troops' – were just beginning to find a mass rapport in Scottish society. So Scotland witnessed the emergence of 'militant Protestantism' during the 1920s, an organised reaction against Irish immigration, 'the grand Papal conspiracy' and state provision of Catholic education, enshrined in law in 1918.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Scotsman* (1 December 1926), p7

<sup>15</sup> *The Scotsman* (30 July 1926), p5

<sup>16</sup> Glasgow Digital Library 'Resistance to Fascism', <http://gdl.cdrl.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyeve23.htm> (Last accessed: 24/1/12)

<sup>17</sup> Pugh (2005) p82

<sup>18</sup> *The Scotsman* (5 April 1929), p12

## Chapter Three

### Defining Fascism: extremist Protestantism and the far-right

Addressing a Glasgow public meeting in November 1933, the Communist Willie Gallagher, who would go on to become MP for West Fife, stated that ‘in Scotland, the fascists were not anti-Jewish but anti-Irish’.<sup>1</sup> Such a claim goes right to the heart of the debate over how prevalent ‘fascism’ was in inter-war Scotland. While a discussion of the extent to which anti-semitism existed in Scotland, and the response of the Jewish community, will be had later on, Gallagher’s assertion raises an important point about what activity did fall under the definition of ‘fascism’ in the inter-war period.

There can be little doubt as to whom Gallagher was referring – with the preceding decade witnessing an upsurge in religious tensions and the growth of ‘Protestant extremism’. By April 1935, the electoral success of extremist Protestant parties and sectarian street clashes has reached such an intensity that *The Scotsman* saw fit to draw comparison with events in Germany, editorialising:

“Every honest minded citizen deplores Jew baiting in Nazi Germany; we want no baiting of Roman Catholics here. We can differ with them on religious grounds, and resist any clear sign of Papal encroachment in the civil sphere, without branding them as traitors or wishing to diminish their civil liberties.”<sup>2</sup>

An understanding of how this situation arose, of an influential newspaper drawing comparison between events in Nazi Germany and Edinburgh, is fundamental to a full analysis of the nature of fascism in inter-war Scotland. It can also help tackle the question of whether a specific Scottish strain of fascism did exist. Religious extremism was nothing new in Scottish society, but it was in the early 1930s that it burst into the political sphere with the emergence of two militant Protestant parties, independent of each other but founded along similar lines, one in Glasgow and the other in Edinburgh. While there is nothing greatly significant about this in itself, given that the inter-war period saw a whole host of extreme rightist parties of various ilk spring up across Britain, what is significant is the level of support that these two organisations – John Cormack’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Forward* (3 Nov 1934), quoted in Gallagher, Tom ‘Protestant Extremism in Urban Scotland: 1930-39: Its Growth and Contraction’ *Scottish Historical Review* Vol. 64 No. 178 (Oct 1985, Edinburgh University Press), p150

<sup>2</sup> *The Scotsman* (26 April 1935), p8

Edinburgh-based 'Protestant Action' (PA) and Alexander Ratcliffes's Glasgow-based 'Scottish Protestant League (SPL) – were able to accrue.

Their internal politics were, however, far from clear cut and the case for defining each party as 'fascist' does not have a straightforward answer. Both were very much centred on one leadership figure – the aforementioned Ratcliffe and Cormack. Cormack had established his group in 1933 upon his expulsion from the Edinburgh Protestant Society, a punishment for his inclination to use 'threats of physical violence to Roman Catholics', according to contemporary legal reports.<sup>3</sup> Cormack served in the Black and Tans during the Irish War of Independence, which may help explain his vociferous hatred of Catholics and the Irish.<sup>4</sup> By 1935, he could command a support of 4000 members, 'an absolute dictator' within the organisation<sup>5</sup>, and was a councillor, elected on a 'No Popery' ticket in the Leith ward.<sup>6</sup> With this large body of support, Cormack was unafraid of using street violence, threats of public disorder and physical intimidation for his own political ends, leading Cullen to conclude that the PA's 'squadrist tactics... look far more 'fascist' than anything the BUF did in Scotland'.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Cormack was involved with establishing his own paramilitary organisation in 1935, ominously named 'Kormack's Kaledonian Klan'. Operating from headquarters in the Lawnmarket, they reportedly possessed several vehicles and firearms<sup>8</sup>, and Kormack saw no issue with threatening the Chief Constable of Edinburgh's police force with his sub-paramilitary force. In 1935, he warned in a letter:

"I have organised a KKK and if this trouble does not cease then my men will have to be brought into Action... we will allow no popish dictation in this city."<sup>9</sup>

The PA campaign of violence peaked in 1935 with violent clashes with police outside a Catholic Eucharistic conference. The Catholic Archbishop of Edinburgh would complain afterwards that 'priests were savagely assaulted, elderly women attacked and kicked, bus loads of children mercilessly stoned' in events that would be 'difficult to parallel in these

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<sup>3</sup> NAS, HH1/777, Roman Catholicism Demonstrations in Edinburgh: 'letter from Cllr. John Cormack to Chief Constable, High St, Edinburgh' (2 August 1935)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher 'Protestant Extremism' (1985), p157

<sup>7</sup> Cullen, 'The Fasces and the Saltire' (2008), p326

<sup>8</sup> Gallagher 'Protestant Extremism' (1985), p163

<sup>9</sup> NAS, HH1/777, Roman Catholicism Demonstrations in Edinburgh: 'letter from Cllr. John Cormack to Chief Constable, High St, Edinburgh' (2 August 1935)

days of enlightenment and progress'.<sup>10</sup> The authorities, on the other hand, were keen to downplay the sectarian violence, insisting that the police had the crowd 'well under control'<sup>11</sup>; although they were perhaps mindful of the negative headlines the disturbances were creating around the world.<sup>12</sup>

Protestant Action were very much a single issue party, yet in 1936 still managed to push Labour into third place in local elections, gaining nearly 31 percent of the vote, although a year later the organisation began to fall apart. It's precisely the single issue nature of their politics, though, which prevents Protestant Action – despite their vilification of a minority group, their attempts to get employers to sack Catholic employees, their street pogroms and bigotry – from easily being labelled as 'fascist'. In fact, they were vocally 'anti-fascist', with Cormack stating in a 1936 interview that 'all our energies will be directed against the Fascists. When I get control, I will put a ban on Fascists on the streets'.<sup>13</sup>

The SPL in Glasgow were less prone to violence, and held a more intellectually astute leader in Alexander Ratcliffe, a lay preacher who moved to Glasgow for opportunistic sectarian reasons in the early 1920s, quickly establishing himself with both a church and offices at the heart of the city.<sup>14</sup> The initial electoral success of the SPL in 1931 municipal elections was more nuanced than the crude bigotry of their Edinburgh counterparts, and the result of a multi-faceted strategy of promising all things to all voters – or at least those of the right religious denomination. Attempts were made to appeal to the working class through 'opposition to cuts in social services and increases in rents' and the middle classes through their policy of reducing corporation rates. Of course, there was also appeal on a basic anti-Catholic level, including a firm rejection of the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act, which allowed for state funding of Catholic schools.<sup>15</sup> The SPL went onto

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<sup>10</sup> *The Scotsman* (12 July 1935)

<sup>11</sup> NAS, HH1/777, Roman Catholicism Demonstrations in Edinburgh: 'Report by Procurator Fiscal, Edinburgh re. Popish Practices: Catholic Demos in Edinburgh' (2 August 1935)

<sup>12</sup> *The Times* (6 August 1935) reported that Scottish travellers in mainland Europe had been 'greatly perturbed at the prominence given to a few isolated instances of sectarian disputes in the streets of Edinburgh... in foreign newspapers'

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher 'Protestant Extremism' (1985), p163

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher (1985), p147

<sup>15</sup> Holmes, Colin 'Alexander Ratcliffe: militant protestant and antisemite' *Traditions of Intolerance*, Kushner & Lunn eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p198

greater success in subsequent years, winning 67,000 votes and 23 percent of the vote in 1933 local elections.<sup>16</sup>

Ratcliffe's relationship with the far-left was complicated. While *Forward* denounced the SPL's 1931 breakthrough as 'Billy and Dan politics', deploring the subordination of major political issues to 'narrow sectarianism', they were nonetheless willing to give Ratcliffe a platform through their letters pages.<sup>17</sup> Ratcliffe was forthright in stating that the SPL councillors were not anything to be feared, with their 'practical programme in the best interests of the working people', denying that his election had been on the back of a 'religious fight'. *Forward* responded by quoting a 'screaming headline' from Ratcliffe's own paper which spoke of the SPL victory as a 'smashing blow to the Catholics and pro-Romanists'.<sup>18</sup> Ratcliffe was clearly not seen as completely beyond the pale, though, and was given space for an article as late as March 1934, even after he had briefly been a member of the short-lived Scottish Democratic Fascist Party.<sup>19</sup>

Ratcliffe soon drifted into obscurity, however, and by the end of the decade his anti-Catholicism was matched only by his anti-semitism, as he became an avowed supporter of Nazi Germany, preaching to anyone who would listen about the influence of 'Roman Catholics and Jews' over British society.<sup>20</sup> Cormack somehow managed to remain a local councillor until 1962, 'reverting from an ogre into a local institution'.<sup>21</sup> But he was a relic of what could have been: Protestant extremism had ultimately failed as a political force for a number of reasons. The mass membership institutions of Protestantism, namely the churches and the Orange Order, may have shared many of the prejudices of PA and the SPL, but their conservative leaderships had little to gain from associating themselves with populist rabble-rousers and street violence. For similar reasons, the same wealthy industrialists who poured money into groups like the anti-socialist Economic League had little interest in backing the group.<sup>22</sup> What was also important was that Catholics, who largely voted for Labour and the ILP, did not form their own sectarian parties, meaning

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<sup>16</sup> Gallagher 'Protestant Extremism' (1985), p149

<sup>17</sup> *Forward* (14 November 1931)

<sup>18</sup> *Forward* (21 November 1931)

<sup>19</sup> *Forward* (3 March 1934)

<sup>20</sup> Holmes 'Alexander Ratcliffe' (1989), p199

<sup>21</sup> Gallagher, Protestant Extremism (1985), p164

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p166

that there was little space for the conflict to escalate.<sup>23</sup> Equally, the lack of a united national movement between the SPL and PA limited each party to its own locality.

However, the entrenched anti-Irish attitudes in sections of Scottish society that gave rise to the political cults of Cormack and Ratcliffe, would somewhat ironically – given their espousal of a politics which in many respects resembled it – actually play a key role in hindering fascism in Scotland. The sectarian divide in Scottish society was something that the most successful exponents of fascist ideology in Britain, the British Union of Fascists, would never be able to reconcile themselves to.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p165

## Chapter Four

### Mosley and the New Party: ‘a stormy reception’

Given the relatively small impact that the British Union of Fascists would make north of the border, its perhaps surprising that Scotland was a major focus of Mosley’s earlier efforts with the New Party. And events in Scotland would, in fact, play a vital role in Mosley’s conversion to outright fascist politics.

Convinced that unemployment was the major burning issue in British politics at the time and that none of the mainstream parties were willing to put forward policies to tackle it, Mosley left Labour and then established the New Party in February 1931. Embracing a programme of both Keynesian economic demands and sweeping reform of government to create a stronger executive, much of the New Party’s initial support came from the ranks of the far-left Independent Labour Party, for whom relations with Labour were increasingly strained.<sup>1</sup> The New Party began with grand ambitions of running 400 candidates for Parliament, but the party struggled to take off and ultimately only ran 23 when October’s General Election came round. However, of these, five were in Scotland, including two sitting MPs, Robert Forgan, who had defected from the ILP, and a Liberal in the south of Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

Examination of *Forward*, the ILP’s Glasgow-based, mass readership weekly newspaper, shows that the party was, at least initially, unsure of what attitude to take towards Mosley. The New Party was launched in Scotland at a Glasgow public meeting in March 1931, with the newspaper reporting that ‘6000 to 7000 people’ were outside the hall half an hour before it had even begun, while thousands waited until the end of the meeting to ‘hear the speakers give their second turn’ outside. Yet despite the large turnout, it was reported that it was ‘disconcertingly quiet’ and ‘seemed as if the whole hall was filled with people who were, on the whole, indifferent to what they had heard’.<sup>3</sup> No real analysis of Mosley’s politics is provided in the report, and this continued in much the same vein during the autumn ahead of the election, even to the extent of playing down the vocal, and often violent, opposition that the New Party was beginning to face.

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<sup>1</sup> Worley, Matthew *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p3 & p36

<sup>2</sup> Milligan (1999), p2

<sup>3</sup> *Forward* (28 March 1931)



Before the main event of the General Election, however, Mosley faced another test: the Glasgow University rectorial elections. Initially nominated by the university's Labour Club, Mosley had refused to step aside after leaving the party. But – amid allegations that his campaign was being run and financed by 'Mosley headquarters in London' rather than local students<sup>4</sup> – the final results were a disaster. Of 2323 votes cast, just 21 went to Mosley.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Mosley's public appearances in Glasgow, which he visited in both September and October, continued to attract large crowds and even the attentions of the national press. *The Times* reported of his open-air appearance on Glasgow Green on 20 September:

"It is estimated that the gathering comprised 40,000 persons, including Communists. It was apparent from the outset that determined opposition was to be offered. Sections of the crowd interrupted continuously. Other sections sang the 'Red Flag' and 'The Internationale' at intervals. Several free fights were in progress simultaneously. While explaining why he resigned from the Labour Party, Sir Oswald was assailed with cries of 'Traitor'"<sup>6</sup>

The 40,000 figure is almost certainly a vast overestimation: most newspapers placed the figure around half that and the police report at 8000.<sup>7</sup> Upon leaving this meeting, New Party supporters, and Mosley himself, had 'sticks and stones' rained down upon them, and in the ensuing melee several people were attacked with razors.<sup>8</sup> These newspaper reports were 'greatly exaggerated' according to the police<sup>9</sup>, but whatever the level of the threat actually was, that day's events in Glasgow would turn out to be pivotal to Mosley's political development. The following day, his close friend Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary of the communists' 'razor attack' and Mosley's response:

"We have a meeting of the Party. Tom [Mosley] says that this forces us to be fascist and that we need no longer hesitate to create our trained and disciplined force. We discuss their uniforms. I suggest grey flannel trousers and suits."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Forward* (17 October 1931)

<sup>5</sup> Milligan (1999), p3

<sup>6</sup> *The Times* (21 September 1931)

<sup>7</sup> SNA HH55/332 'Meetings on Glasgow Green': City of Glasgow Police Report

<sup>8</sup> *The Times* (21 September 1931)

<sup>9</sup> SNA HH55/332 'Meetings on Glasgow Green': City of Glasgow Police Report

<sup>10</sup> Nicolson, Harold *Diaries and Letters 1930-39* (London: Collins, 1966), p91

Mosley returned to Glasgow in October to address another mass meeting, but on this occasion most of the audience was kept outside of St Andrews Hall as ‘the authorities were afraid, [Mosley] explained, that if they got in they might smash things’. Yet *Forward* described it as a ‘distinctly dull evening’, at which he attempted to address the crowds outside after the meeting, before giving up and ‘setting out to walk to his hotel, surrounded by policemen’.<sup>11</sup> The mainstream press went for a rather more sensationalist approach, writing that ‘thousands stormed the doors’ and of a ‘stormy reception’.<sup>12</sup> While it’s true that most papers were at this time only interested in reporting New Party meetings which could lead to dramatic headlines about violence and disorder, the contrast in tone with that of *Forward* is still stark. The ILP’s reportage may be in no small part due to the fact that the militant response to the New Party largely came from the ranks of the revolutionary left, including the Communist Party, with who they held – to some extent – a mutual animosity.

In any case, the New Party did not fare well electorally – of the five Scottish candidates, even the sitting MPs among them polled four percent or lower. This was replicated across the country and would seem to have proved to Mosley the need for a new direction. A mission to Italy followed, and on his return the British Union of Fascists would soon emerge, formally established in October 1932. The first signs of any conspicuous BUF activity in Scotland would not arrive for some time after, however.

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<sup>11</sup> *Forward* (24 October 1931)

<sup>12</sup> *The Times* (20 October 1931), p8; *The Scotsman* (20 October 1931), p10

## Chapter Five

### The BUF and the ‘Scottish Fascists’

In contrast to the effort made with the New Party, Mosley – whom the new, now openly fascist, project remained very much centred around – made no immediate attempt to push the BUF in Scotland. It left the ground open for a particular Scottish strain of fascism to emerge in the summer of 1933 – in fact the only attempt there was to reconcile corporatist fascism with militant Protestant sectarianism. The short-lived Scottish Democratic Fascist Party was spearheaded by William Weir Gilmour – who had come on a political journey via the ILP and then the New Party – and Major Hume Sleight, but by the end of the year both would have joined the BUF and the SDFP disappeared.<sup>1</sup> Based in Glasgow, the party was both Scottish nationalist and fervently anti-Catholic, their arrival met with a mixed reception from the BUF who had yet to establish any presence in Scotland. While welcoming their embracement of the ‘Corporate State’, the BUF did feel the need to clarify their own position on both Catholicism, on which they held ‘entire disagreement’ with the SDFP, and also Scottish nationalism, of which ‘[their] more extreme proposals’ would threaten ‘national unity’.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander Ratcliffe was briefly a member of the SDFP and allowed the group to meet in his church building. Ratcliffe had been impressed by the SDFP’s initial charter, which put anti-Catholicism at its fore, promising to prohibit Irish immigration to Scotland, repeal the relevant sections of the 1918 Education Act and expel all religious orders from Scotland.<sup>3</sup> However, Ratcliffe left when the anti-Catholic elements of the fascists’ programme were deleted later in 1933 and the SDFP soon vanished altogether. It was somewhat of a missed opportunity for fascism in Scotland: Gilmour would appear correct in his analysis that a truly successful Scottish fascism would have needed to tap into anti-Irish and anti-Catholic bigotry. But his fascist grouping arrived too late on the scene, and when Ratcliffe’s SPL enjoyed an electoral breakthrough in local elections in 1933, the politics of tiny fascist factions were suddenly irrelevant, the ground already seized.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the damage had been done and upon trying to launch in Scotland, the BUF found that they were caught in a ‘double bind’: smeared by the anti-Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Gallagher ‘Protestant Extremism...’ (1985), p150

<sup>2</sup> *The Blackshirt* (16 June 1933)

<sup>3</sup> Gallagher ‘Protestant Extremism...’ (1985), p150

<sup>4</sup> Milligan ‘BUF Policy...’ (1999), p7

legacy of the SDFP and yet simultaneously accused by Gilmour of being ‘run by Catholics... in the interests of Roman Catholics’.<sup>5</sup>

This catch-22 would continue to haunt the BUF through the 1930s, epitomised by heckles at an Edinburgh rally in 1934 that ‘A lot of your Blackshirts are Italians and you’re under the Pope of Rome’.<sup>6</sup> The BUF, more used to histrionic hyperbole – their paper contained a weekly column detailing the pervasive influence of ‘the Jews’ in British society – were left to meekly responding with statistics and reeling off conjecture about corporatism bonding together the masses. A Motherwell public meeting in 1935 was told that the BUF had carried out a census of its leadership and ‘it had shown that the number of Roman Catholics in such positions represented only 12 per cent of the total’.<sup>7</sup> Whether this managed to convince those present at the meeting, hosted in the town’s Orange Hall, is not stated, but the idea that there could have been any kind of compromise with Cormack’s Protestant Action or Ratcliffe’s Protestant League under these circumstances was patently impossible. When forced to comment on the issue of Scotland’s religious divide, the party would reiterate its ‘strict impartiality’, and hold up the idea that ‘in the classless society of the Blackshirts, the loyal citizens of Scotland, Protestant and Catholic, will find a common purpose’.<sup>8</sup> This analysis would fatally undermine attempts to turn fascism into a mass movement in Scotland, and to compound matters, the BUF gave little attention to the Irish question, perhaps due to Mosley’s background of tacit support for Irish nationalism while an MP.<sup>9</sup>

Following the rapid demise of the SDFP, the BUF would attempt to shore up its support in Scotland with an official launch in October 1933. However, references to Scotland in *The Blackshirt* are notable by their absence over the following months and into the new year. Not surprisingly for such a leader-centric organisation, though, it was planned visits from Mosley in April and June 1934 that suddenly brought the existence of the BUF in Scotland to the attention of the newspaper. Ahead of his June visit, a round-up of Scottish activity claimed that the intervening months since the launch had set the ‘heather on fire’, with branches ‘flourishing’ in as many as twenty different towns and

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<sup>5</sup> Cullen ‘The Failure of the BUF...’ (2008), p324-5

<sup>6</sup> Milligan ‘BUF Policy...’ (1999), p13

<sup>7</sup> *The Blackshirt* (17 May 1935)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, RM ‘The Swastika and the Shamrock: British Fascism and the Irish Question, 1918-1940’ *Albion* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring 1997), p71

cities across the country, and active groups in ‘some of the public schools’.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the south of Scotland seems to have been fertile ground for the BUF: Dalbeattie is described as ‘the cradle of Scots fascism’, while the Dumfries branch, only two months in existence, was ‘already numbering its membership in hundreds’.<sup>11</sup> Other groups existed in Gatehouse of Fleet, Castle Douglas, Berwick, Annan and Thornhill, all in or around the border region.

In fact, it was Dumfries that Mosley chose for his first BUF rally in Scotland, in April 1934, enjoying a large turnout. Thus it’s perhaps not surprising that estimations place around half the total Scottish membership, which at the BUF’s mid-1934 numerical height was no more than about a thousand, in the south of Scotland.<sup>12</sup> Special Branch believed the majority to have been ‘passive members, mostly business men’.<sup>13</sup> There is evidence to suggest that the BUF branches in Dalbeattie and Dumfries were fairly active at this time, reaching out beyond the sort of activities that would usually be associated with fascist groups. The Dumfries branch established a ‘lifeguard detachment’ to patrol the beaches of the Solway Firth during the summer months<sup>14</sup>, while the Dalbeattie group busied themselves with holding ladies’ nights and jumble sales.<sup>15</sup> Far from a fascist fighting force, it more gives the impression of a genial middle class social circle.

Rural southern Scotland was, by contrast, not an area where the radical left held any great sway, but the Communist Party still sent members to hold anti-fascist activity in Dumfries, with some success – a branch of the party was established and even gained a seat on the local council.<sup>16</sup> At Mosley’s rally in April 1934, ‘the communist element was in evidence’, although whether they had been parachuted into the town – like the majority of the meeting’s 3000 attendees – is unclear.<sup>17</sup> When Lady Cynthia Mosley, the wife of ‘the Leader’, came to Dumfries later in 1934, *The Blackshirt* made much of the Communist no-show, given the expectation of trouble ahead of the meeting.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Blackshirt* (1 June 1934)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Cullen ‘The Fasces and the Saltire’ (2008), p312

<sup>13</sup> TNA: PRO, HO 144/674 216/202, quoted in Cullen ‘The Fasces and the Saltire’ (2008), p312

<sup>14</sup> *The Blackshirt* (29 June 1934)

<sup>15</sup> *The Blackshirt* (14 December 1934)

<sup>16</sup> Maitles ‘Blackshirts Across the Border’ (2003), p95

<sup>17</sup> *The Scotsman* (7 April 1934)

<sup>18</sup> *The Blackshirt* (22 June 1934); *The Scotsman* (16 June 1934)

## Chapter Six

### ‘Great progress’ in the Central Belt?

The central focus of Oswald Mosley’s June 1934 visit to Scotland was a major rally in Edinburgh’s Usher Hall, a venue he would visit again in May 1936. These, alongside the Dumfries rally in April 1934, were his only public speaking engagements in Scotland during the entire existence of the BUF, which – given the key role mass rallies were ascribed within the party in terms of recruitment and visibility – goes some way to indicating the relatively low impact the BUF made in Scotland. Mosley also visited Aberdeen in late 1937, but this was a fairly low key affair at which he had lunch with supporters and presented a leading local fascist with an award for his service.<sup>1</sup>

Both of Mosley’s Edinburgh rallies witnessed violent scenes. In 1934, this came as hundreds of uniformed Blackshirts – many of them bussed in from the north of England – clashed with anti-fascist opponents after the close of the meeting. As the Blackshirt’s buses drove away ‘stones and bricks were thrown’, smashing many of the bus windows and causing several of their passengers to require hospital treatment.<sup>2</sup> One Blackshirt was partially blinded. The meeting itself, attended by 2500 people, was less eventful with just a few minor interruptions, giving Mosley the opportunity to outline his party’s policy in relation to Scotland to an audience of ‘ministers of religion, prominent lawyers, city councillors, farmers, clerks, shop assistants and artisans’ – at least according to the BUF’s own propaganda.<sup>3</sup>

Much like the New Party before it, the BUF – or at least Mosley on the few occasions when he visited – were able to command large audiences, yet there is no evidence that this translated into active support for the fascists. On the contrary, there is good reason to believe that a majority of attendees were there for the sheer spectacle of it all: Mosley’s oratory, the ubiquitous threat of violence, and the buzz surrounding the event, which would inevitably be hyped up in the local press in the days leading up to it. At the 1934 Usher Hall rally, a crowd of up to 300 gathered merely to watch the 100 or so communists as they demonstrated outside.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Scotsman* ‘Sir Oswald Mosley at Aberdeen’ (23 November 1937)

<sup>2</sup> *The Scotsman* ‘Street Fighting Follows Meeting’ (2 June 1934)

<sup>3</sup> *The Blackshirt* ‘The Leader in Scotland’ (8 June 1934)

<sup>4</sup> *The Scotsman* (2 June 1934)

In 1936, a more respectable alliance of forces – including the Young Liberals, church ministers, local councillors and the district Trades Council – lined up in the Usher Hall the night before Mosley's rally to condemn fascism as the 'greatest threat to liberty and peaceful progress of our times' and to stand up for 'democracy and freedom'.<sup>5</sup> A day previously a petition of some 15,000 signatures had been submitted to Edinburgh Town Council requesting that the BUF be denied the use of Usher Hall, but given it had been presented at such short notice, was refused.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to these peaceful means of protest, the evening of the BUF's rally saw more radical elements, mostly aligned to the Communist Party, attempt to directly intervene and prevent the meeting from going ahead. One Communist Party member who would later serve in the International Brigades, George Watters, recalled:

"I remember gaun to a meeting in the Usher Hall, having been supplied wi' a ticket by some of the students at Edinburgh University. I landed right down in the second front seat in the Usher Hall... My job was to get up and create a disturbance right away by challenging Sir Oswald Mosley, which I did. At that time I had a pretty loud voice. And Sir Oswald Mosley wasn't being heard... There was a rush and in the rush I got a bit of a knocking about, and taken up to High Street [police station]."<sup>7</sup>

Later fined five pounds for breaching the Public Meetings Act<sup>8</sup>, George Watters was far from the only person arrested over the course of the evening, including at least one Blackshirt steward who was charged with assault.<sup>9</sup> The two Mosley meetings in Edinburgh were not, however, the archetypal Scottish experience for the BUF, as on both occasions the BUF had a balance of forces far more in their favour, with large numbers of Blackshirts brought in from across the country. So while Mosley's presence may have grabbed the headlines on this occasion, the rest of the time the BUF found themselves vastly outnumbered by their opponents and generally on the backfoot. The BUF did, of course, face militant opposition across Britain, the historical significance of which is well documented. But in many parts of the country, such as Lancashire and East London, they were also a force to be reckoned with, able to put hundreds of footsoldiers on the streets and amounting to a serious fighting force. In Scotland, however, they simply

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<sup>5</sup> *The Scotsman* 'Challenge to Sir O Mosley' (15 May 1936)

<sup>6</sup> *The Scotsman* 'Fascist Meeting Protest' (14 May 1936)

<sup>7</sup> MacDougall, Ian (ed.) *Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), p33

<sup>8</sup> *The Scotsman* 'Usher Hall Row' (10 June 1936)

<sup>9</sup> *The Scotsman* 'Fascist Meeting Sequel' (6 June 1936)

never had the manpower – something which even *The Blackshirt* was forced to acknowledge in autumn 1934, when the party began a sustained campaign in Glasgow with the local branch vying to capture the ‘Mosley cup’.<sup>10</sup> Clashes with ‘Red’ opponents rapidly became a near weekly feature in the paper.

While there was attempts to spin this positively – ‘this renewal of terrorism is proof that the Communists are making desperate efforts to impede the great progress that Fascism is making in Glasgow’<sup>11</sup> – it would be hard to judge that the BUF did make great leaps in Glasgow over this time. By February 1935, Special Branch estimated Glasgow’s BUF membership at just 50.<sup>12</sup> This is hardly surprising given the extent of the opposition which the BUF faced – even the most hardened believer in Mosley’s corporatist vision would have struggled to find the motivation for public activity when for instance, 200 communists could descend on them while selling papers at Charing Cross<sup>13</sup>, ‘a mob of 600 Reds... led by a Jew’ could attack a handful of Blackshirts as they left their office<sup>14</sup>, or they were hounded out of restaurants in which they were having supper.<sup>15</sup> If the anti-fascist tactic was to create an atmosphere in which it was wholly intolerable for the BUF to operate – a strategy of ‘no platform’ – then it was surely a success. Another communist, and later an International Brigader, Garry McCartney states that anti-fascism became integral to left-wing activity, and identity, in the city:

“The working class movement was very much informed and very much involved in the anti-fascist struggle. Glasgow at the weekend was a forum of meetings, all over the city, at street corners, and in the centre of the city. We had tramp preachers, we had the YCL, ILP... it was a whole seabed of discussions.”<sup>16</sup>

If this was ‘Red Clydeside’ it was very much alive and well in the 1930s, and the role that a sizeable, well organised radical left would play in opposing fascism in urban Scotland is significant in explaining the failure of the BUF, simply for the fact that street activity and public meetings became a virtual impossibility for the fascists.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Blackshirt* (7 September 1934)

<sup>11</sup> *The Blackshirt* (7 September 1934)

<sup>12</sup> Webber, GC ‘Patterns of Membership and Support for the British Union of Fascists’ *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 19 No. 4 (Oct 1984), p606

<sup>13</sup> *The Blackshirt* (31 August 1934)

<sup>14</sup> *The Blackshirt* (21 September 1934)

<sup>15</sup> *The Blackshirt* (14 September 1934)

<sup>16</sup> MacDougall *Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (1986), p241



## Chapter Seven

### Anti-fascism in Glasgow's Jewish community

Glasgow was unique in Scotland in that it also had a relatively large Jewish population, and given the prominence of anti-semitism in both the dogma and activity of inter-war fascism, it is worth considering the response of this community in its own right.

In May 1933, Mosley had reassured the *Jewish Chronicle* that anti-semitism is 'certainly not our policy' and that 'the policy of the German Nazis was a great mistake'.<sup>1</sup> But just over a year later, following their peak in support in mid 1934, when the BUF received backing from Lord Rothermere's press and sections of the Conservative party<sup>2</sup> and was able to muster 12,000 supporters for its rally at the Olympia in London, the party entered a period of decline. A combination of factors, including its leadership's admiration for Hitler and a quiet withdrawal of support from conservative figures including Rothermere, alongside pressure from the party's grassroots, saw anti-semitism start to come to the fore of the party's programme. It marked a new direction for the organisation, away from obsessing over the idea of stepping in to save Britain from a communist threat, and instead focusing their resources on specific localities in the hope of building concentrated strength. The most prominent example of this is the east end of London, where the fascists pursued a strategy of vociferous anti-semitism in an area with a large Jewish community.<sup>3</sup>

Scotland's Jewish population, which numbered 15,000 by 1935, was concentrated in a few areas, primarily the Gorbals in Glasgow where easily over half of Jews in Scotland lived.<sup>4</sup> However, there is no evidence that the BUF were ever able to target Scotland's Jewish community in the same manner as the East End of London. But, by the mid-1930s, anti-semitism had become such a central tenet of the BUF's activity, that many Jews were drawn into anti-fascist activity. Of course, they would also have been keenly aware of events in Europe, where Hitler's anti-semitism was becoming ever more

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<sup>1</sup> Hogdson, Keith *Fighting Fascism* (2010), p133

<sup>2</sup> *The Fascist Week* (19 January 1934)

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Elaine R. 'Jewish responses to political anti-semitism and fascism in the East End of London, 1920-1939' in *Traditions of Intolerance* Kushner & Lunn eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989),

<sup>4</sup> Maitles, Henry 'Confronting Fascism' (1997), p106 & 'The Jewish Community in Scotland' *NQ Higher Scottish History: Migration & Empire* <http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/higherscottishhistory/migrationandempire/experienceofimmigrants/jewish.asp> (last accessed: 28/01/12)

pronounced and anti-Jewish sentiment was gaining ground in several eastern European states.

From 1928, Glasgow's Jewish community produced a weekly newspaper, the *Jewish Echo*, the pages of which are largely filled with notices of Jewish social and religious events, regular reporting of events in Palestine and other news of note to Jews in Glasgow. It can also give us some indication of the attitudes of the community, and its various component parts, towards the rise of fascism both at home and abroad.

On 30 September 1936, the paper reported that fascists were 'at work in Glasgow':

"The British Union of Fascists are becoming active in Glasgow, especially in the East End where they are distributing wholesale a pamphlet '10 Points of Fascist Policy' by Sir Oswald Mosley... a member of the local Jewish community had occasion to enter a building in the East End of the city to use the phone and was amazed to see huge supplies of the fascist pamphlets lying ready. In the working class districts such propaganda, if not satisfactorily countered, might have serious consequences."<sup>5</sup>

There are a few striking aspects to this article: firstly, that it reports BUF activity in Glasgow as a new phenomenon, when BUF meetings and paper sales, not to mention street clashes with opponents, had been a regular occurrence for two years by September 1936. The purely anecdotal nature of the evidence, combined with the 'amazement' at noticing the BUF propaganda, also suggests that sections of the Jewish community in Glasgow existed in relative isolation, where the horrors of fascism were an alien concept consigned to foreign countries – and certainly not the streets of Glasgow. The attitudes of Glasgow Jews towards the influx of German refugees in the later 1930s would back this assertion up, with many sceptical and fostering some hostility to the 'westernised and anti-religious' incomers.<sup>6</sup> Finally the last sentence, which suggests that working class people are more susceptible to fascism, is worth noting. This stands in contrast to the left-wing perception of fascism as having a social base embedded in the artisan middle class, but fits with the, often condescending, middle class perspective that permeates across the editorial content of the *Echo*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Jewish Echo* (30 September 1936)

<sup>6</sup> Maitles 'Confronting Fascism' (1997), p112

It is unclear what the *Jewish Echo* thought of as a satisfactory countering of fascist activity, for just two months later its editorial would strongly condemn any attempt to label the Jewish community as 'anti-fascist'. Commenting on the decision of the Jewish Peoples' Council, which it scathingly notes has a strong 'radical and socialist' element, to declare anti-fascism as part of its core programme, it calls on Jews to see anti-semitism as separate from fascism. To actively engage in the fight against fascism would be to 'play into the hands of our enemies who declare that Jews and Communists are synonymous'.<sup>7</sup>

Such attitudes were not held by all within the Jewish community, however. In 1936 a Workers' Circle, which were working class Jewish organisations dedicated to self-education and social events as well as political and trade union activity, was started in Glasgow. Occasional notices of its activity were carried in the *Jewish Echo*, and it was stated to have a membership of around 400. Alongside a bridge club, its own football team and so on, the Workers' Circle collected money for the 'Spanish Relief Fund' to aid the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>8</sup> In July 1936, it was noted that a 'start will soon be made to a definite anti-fascist campaign in the city' by the Workers' Circle.<sup>9</sup>

The Workers' Circle actively took part in directly opposing the BUF, organising, along with others, demonstrations and actions when the fascists tried to hold activity. Jewish anti-fascists were particularly active in opposing the BUF's attempts to gain a foothold in Govanhill, just south of the Gorbals where the mass of Glasgow's Jews lived. Morris Smith, its secretary, has said that the BUF were 'howled down. They never got a turnout. That was the line then, we had to stop them appearing on the streets.' On one occasion, an open air meeting addressed by leading BUF member William Joyce (latterly nicknamed 'Lord Haw Haw' as a Nazi propagandist during the Second World War) at nearby Queens Park was physically broken up by the Workers' Circle and others, with the platform 'thrown up in the air'.<sup>10</sup>

But this sort of action was met with much hostility from the Jewish business community, whose attitudes were more in line with that taken by the *Echo*. It points to what one active member of the Workers' Circle at the time, Monty Berkeley, has described as 'very

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<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Echo* (27 November 1936)

<sup>8</sup> *Jewish Echo* (28 August 1936)

<sup>9</sup> *Jewish Echo* (24 July 1936)

<sup>10</sup> Maitles 'Confronting Fascism' (1997), p111

much a class division' in their respective approaches towards anti-fascism.<sup>11</sup> This pitted Jewish business owners, newspapers such as the *Echo* and religious leaders – the Board of Deputies of British Jews embarked on a strategy of 'apologetic propaganda and appeals to the government'<sup>12</sup> – against working class Jews, many of whom were active in the labour movement and members of the Communist Party and so forth. For although we may refer to the 'Jewish community' as if it were a single entity, it was – much like the rest of society – riven by class and social divisions;<sup>13</sup> this split also crossed over into other spheres such as attitudes towards Zionism.<sup>14</sup> Berkeley recalls hearing 'Jewish businessmen in Glasgow... saying that they think Mussolini is doing a good job getting rid of trade unionists and communists. We need a strong man in this country like Mussolini'.<sup>15</sup>

This division was a reflection of the situation across the country, including in the east end of London where religious and community leaders urged Jews to stay away from anti-BUF mobilisations. However, the mass participation of working class Jews in the events around the Battle of Cable Street speaks for itself.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p110

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Maitles, Henry 'Jewish Trade Unionists in Glasgow' *Immigrants and Minorities* Vol. 10 (Nov 1991), p59-64

<sup>14</sup> The letters section of the *Jewish Echo* contained furious intra-community debate over attitudes towards such issues. One typical example is of a correspondent angered at having attended an anti-fascist meeting only to be met with 'a verbal diatribe against the Jewish National Movement that... could have stood well with the outpourings of a German anti-Semite' (3 July 1936). The paper frequently attacked those left-wing MPs who were 'champions of the Arab cause' (10 July 1936); this division further exacerbated the split over anti-fascism.

<sup>15</sup> Maitles 'Confronting Fascism' (1997), p111

<sup>16</sup> Smith 'Jewish responses to political anti-semitism' (1989), p61-62

## Chapter Eight

### Scotland's Cable Street? The BUF in Aberdeen

From 1936 the BUF had begun a concerted effort to establish themselves in Aberdeen. While fitting with their strategy at the time of trying to build strength in specific localities, there was no real logic to it beyond that, except for the presence of a local minor aristocrat and pro-fascist, William Chambers-Hunter. Alongside his sister-in-law, Mrs Botha, they spent nearly three years attempting to build a fascist movement in the city, pouring in a great deal of effort and resources.<sup>1</sup>

A year to the day since the famous Battle of Cable Street, when 300,000 workers faced down the police to stop a BUF march through Jewish areas of London's East End, similar scenes would be witnessed in Aberdeen – albeit on a much smaller scale. Several thousand were assembled for a united rally between different left groups in the city's Market Stance when the fascist's van rolled up with the intention of holding a rally. It was, however, 'heavily escorted by police', who – according to complaints later made to the Secretary of State for Scotland – 'batoned down defenceless workers in the interests of preparing the way for the entry of the BUF'.<sup>2</sup>

However, a backlash ensued, with calls for the Chief Constable of the Aberdeen's police force to resign and even moves from the ILP and Labour benches of the local council to hold an official enquiry into the day's events.<sup>3</sup> Although this was later abandoned, the official outcry seems to have made an impact on the police force in Aberdeen, who over the next year reversed their attitudes to the fascists vis-à-vis anti-fascist demonstrators, which is discussed below.

The disorder in October 1937 was far from the first such clash, however. One of the key roles of the quasi-paramilitary Blackshirts was to ensure the successful running, and stewarding, of fascist meetings, yet in Aberdeen the balance of forces was such to make this impossible, with the party's rallies continually broken up and halted by anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Kibblewhite, Liz & Rigby, Andrew *Fascism in Aberdeen: street politics in the 1930s* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Peoples' Press, 1978), p23

<sup>2</sup> NAS, HH55/704, Demonstrations and Disturbances: Police Reports etc: letter from National Unemployed Workers Movement to the Secretary of State for Scotland' (15 October 1937)

<sup>3</sup> *Press and Journal* (15 November 1937)

fascists.<sup>4</sup> Because of this, Chambers-Hunter had to adopt new ‘guerilla style’ tactics, which involved rolling up in a location with the BUF’s van and loudhailer system and carrying out impromptu open-air meetings. But the anti-fascists adopted new tactics as well – from getting friendly public transport workers to provide tip-offs to sending children out on bicycles to then report back on the fascists’ location, all within a ‘very compact’ city centre before the advent of housing schemes.<sup>5</sup> On occasion, the communists would receive word of BUF gatherings in advance, including in September 1938 when ‘a hostile mob of over 6000 people’ attacked Chambers-Hunter as his van rolled into Torry, greeting him with ‘a shower of burning fireworks, sticks, stones and pieces of coal’.<sup>6</sup> In a new turn of events, the police on this occasion stood by, more concerned with directing traffic than throwing themselves in the way of the anti-fascist onslaught. The three fascists – including Botha and Chambers-Hunter – eventually managed to flee, later requiring hospital treatment.<sup>7</sup>

It was enough to convince the BUF that the police were ‘putting a premium on hooliganism’<sup>8</sup> and on this occasion, it was to be them that made allegations of ‘serious maladministration in the Aberdeen Police Force’:

“At the last Market Stance meeting [October 1937], the current rumour that the Chief was a fascist because of batons being used on the hooligans has in my opinion forced him to try and disprove the rumour.”

Communications between the police force and legal officials show that, by this stage, patience was wearing thin with the continual disturbances. The point was made that, despite numerous arrests and convictions of anti-fascists over the course of the two year BUF campaign, ‘the disturbances have gone on’.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the police reached the conclusion that:

“The only practicable method of dealing with the situation would appear to be to debar the fascists from proceeding to the appointed meeting place... it is regrettable to have to suggest taking this course as it may appear like submitting to mob law... although

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<sup>4</sup> Kibblewhite & Rigby *Fascism in Aberdeen* (1978), p26

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p27

<sup>6</sup> *The Herald* (13 September 1938)

<sup>7</sup> *The Scotsman* (12 September 1938)

<sup>8</sup> NAS, HH55/705, Demonstrations & Disturbances Police Reports etc.: ‘Letter from Chambers-Hunter to Aberdeen Chief Constable’ (14 August 1938)

<sup>9</sup> NAS, AD59/38, Lord Advocate’s Department correspondence and papers: ‘Letter from Procurator Fiscal. Aberdeenshire to Crown Office, Edinburgh’ (20 September 1938)

speakers are entitled to free speech, it is not the duty of the police to maintain free speech at meetings which create a highly dangerous situation and may end in a riot.”<sup>10</sup>

This admission by the police was a vindication of the anti-fascists’ no platform tactic. Clearly, the police held little sympathy with the Communist Party, and in fact Chambers-Hunter’s earlier correspondence with the Chief Constable suggests a mutual respect for one another; by late 1938, though, their telephone calls had descended to ‘bawling down the receiver’ and calling each other ‘cowards’.<sup>11</sup> But with the police primarily interested in maintaining public order, it came down to a simple question of the balance of forces. With a determined opposition who could summon hundreds onto the streets, multiplied by ‘huge crowds of several thousand’ onlookers<sup>12</sup>, by far the easiest course of action for the police was to ‘debar the fascists’, who often numbered in just single figures. The exerting of political pressure from sympathetic councillors must also not be discounted. For fascism to function in Aberdeen, it evidently required the protection of the state, and when this finally withdrew in 1938, for reasons as much practical as they were political, it marked the demise of Chambers-Hunter’s experiment. The 1938 incident in Torry was the last such clash in Aberdeen, and within six months both Chambers-Hunter and Mrs Botha had left the BUF over a disagreement on economic policy.<sup>13</sup>

Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen represented the BUF’s main efforts to break into urban Scotland, and in all three cities it met with little success. Only Edinburgh came close to having a functioning multi-branch structure, and even then membership is unlikely to have gone much over the 100 mark at any given point, with oral evidence suggesting that membership turnover in the BUF was high.<sup>14</sup> In no small part this was down to the militant action of those who opposed them in the streets, who made it effectively impossible for the fascists to organise publicly. Yet if fascism presented such a minor threat – as discussed above, the BUF often numbered just a handful of activists on the street – what then was the motivation of anti-fascists, who were willing to sacrifice

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<sup>10</sup> NAS, AD59/38, Lord Advocate’s Department correspondence and papers: ‘Report from Superintendent W Murray to Chief Constable, Aberdeen City Police’ (14 September 1938)

<sup>11</sup> NAS, HH55/705, Demonstrations & Disturbances Police Reports etc.: letters between Chambers-Hunter and Chief Constable, Aberdeen City Police (14 August 1938)

<sup>12</sup> NAS, AD59/38, Lord Advocate’s Department correspondence and papers: ‘Report from Superintendent W Murray to Chief Constable, Aberdeen City Police’ (14 September 1938)

<sup>13</sup> Kibblewhite & Rigby *Fascists in Aberdeen* (1979), p41

<sup>14</sup> Veterans of the anti-BUF campaign in Aberdeen recall being ‘occasionally approached’ by former members who apologised for their past behaviour and beliefs, in Kibblewhite & Rigby *Fascism in Aberdeen* (1979), p43

not just their time and energy, but also sometimes their liberty, in order to see off the 'threat' of the fascists? It's this situation which leads Cullen to accuse the opponents of fascism of actually being more prone to violence and disorder than the fascists themselves, with the BUF cast as 'far more the victims of political violence than they were the perpetrators'.<sup>15</sup> On first look at the history of the BUF in say, Glasgow or Aberdeen, this does appear the case, but it ignores the Europe-wide context that anti-fascism must be placed in in order to understand the motivations of their contemporary opponents. Fascism in Britain could not really be separated from fascism abroad, from the perspective of left or right. For instance, for the BUF's ruling class supporters, the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler's June 1934 pogrom against rival Nazis, compounded the damage already done to the BUF's image by the violent scenes at the Olympia rally, alienating them further. Thus it was the same spirit of internationalism that saw over 500 young men and women from Scotland volunteer to fight against fascism in distant Spain, that justified paying such great attention to the struggle against fascism in Scotland, even in wildly differing circumstances.<sup>16</sup> International links were also well founded, not just in terms of the International Brigades in the 1936-1939 war, but also through acquaintances made with crewmen aboard ships from countries under fascist dictatorship. In 1936, the left in Aberdeen became involved in a strike of Spanish seamen whose captain was refusing to implement the orders of the new Republican government for higher wages; over the course of the subsequent three months it was stranded in Aberdeen, solid links were made, adding a human face to the civil war that would erupt just weeks later.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cullen 'The Fasces and the Saltire' (2008), p329

<sup>16</sup> Gray, Daniel *Homage to Caledonia* (2008), p17

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p28



## Chapter Nine

### BUF policy and Scottish nationalism

The opposition meted out to the BUF played an important role in preventing them from gaining any real foothold in Scotland. However, across Europe, labour movements and communist parties that were the strongest of anywhere in the world were unable to effectively resist the advance of the far-right. Even in Ireland, the proto-fascist Blueshirts were able to attract mass support, with 100,000 members in a country with a fraction of the population of Britain.<sup>1</sup> Why the BUF failed is therefore more complex than simply the fact that they were opposed on a physical basis. As has been discussed, bigotry and xenophobia were hardly new developments in Scottish society, yet the BUF wholly failed to tap into this existing sentiment, with the ground already seized by Protestant extremism. But the inter-war period in Scotland also saw the growth of a different kind of nationalism from that of the BUF, with Scottish nationalism breaking on to the political scene for the first time.

The attitude of Scottish nationalists towards fascism was mixed: figures like Andrew Dewar Gibb, a leading figure in the Scottish National Party (SNP), were not shy about their disdain for Scotland's Irish population, who he cast as criminals and 'immeasurably inferior in every way' to the 'Scottish race'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Scottish nationalists played an active role in opposing the BUF – although one that the fascists were keen to play down, with *The Blackshirt* stating after demonstrations during Mosley's June 1934 visit that 'it is with the hammer and sickle of Moscow, not with the St Andrews Cross of Scotland, that fascism has ultimately to contend with in the North'.<sup>3</sup> At that same meeting, Mosley issued a 'bold challenge to separatists', contending that it is only possible to 'solve our economic problems by planning the joint resources of Britain' along corporatist lines.<sup>4</sup> This was the sum of BUF policy, with the organisation staunchly unionist. However, they did make some concessions towards Scottish nationalism, with William Joyce describing it as a 'legitimate aspiration', but one that would be 'satisfied in a system that permitted the affairs of Scottish commerce to be discussed and arranged by

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<sup>1</sup> Cronin, Mike 'The Blueshirts in the Irish Free State, 1932-1935: the nature of socialist republican and governmental opposition' in *Opposing Fascism*, Kirk & McElligot eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Gibb, Andrew Dewar *Scotland in Eclipse* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Press, 1930), p56

<sup>3</sup> *The Blackshirt* (8 June 1934)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Scotsmen'.<sup>5</sup> The vagueness of this promise was perhaps a deliberate skirting of the real issue; a minor concession towards devolved power without specificity of detail. In fact, specific Scottish policies were at a minimum across the BUF's programme, only really arising on the occasions when BUF speakers crossed the border for speaking excursions, and generally revolving around agricultural and fishing policy.<sup>6</sup>

Much like the BUF's failure to tap into militant Protestantism, Scottish nationalism presented a challenge that the BUF failed to come to terms with. In Edinburgh, which did not have the experience of Weir Gilmour's nationalist Scottish Democratic Fascist Party, this failure would lead to a BUF split off in the form of the 'Scottish Union of Fascists' (SUF). But beyond causing a minor stir in the pages of the local press, in which the SUF leader T W Denholm Hay stated that 'Scottish nationalist sentiment is today higher than ever before... no Scotsman will accept the policy of any leader of English fascists as the policy applicable to his own country',<sup>7</sup> the SUF made little impact. For instance, the same day as Denholm Hay's letter was published, 2500 would attend Mosley's rally in the Usher Hall, putting his claims somewhat into doubt.

The authoritarian, hierarchical composition of the BUF meant that there was little scope for adapting policy specifically towards Scotland, leaving the Scottish organisation subject to the diktats of the party's London based leadership. Anti-semitism, while by all means existing, was not a political force with wide resonance in Scottish society in the same manner as Scottish nationalism or anti-Irish racism, and as it began central to the party's programme, there was simply no audience for them to even attempt to tap in to.<sup>8</sup> In most parts of the country, the BUF simply withered away by the late 1930s – the lack of organisation self-evident in the fact that of the 1000 BUF members interned following its outlawing in early 1940, only three were within Scotland.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Blackshirt* (22 February 1935)

<sup>6</sup> Cullen 'The Fasces and the Saltire' (2008), p332

<sup>7</sup> *The Scotsman* (1 June 1934)

<sup>8</sup> Milligan 'British Union of Fascists Policy in Relation to Scotland' (1998), p14

<sup>9</sup> Cullen 'The Fasces and the Saltire' (2008), p330

## Chapter Ten

### No audience, no platform: why inter-war fascism failed in Scotland

The two decades following the end of the First World War were ones of clashing ideologies and polarised politics across Europe. As a vicious wave of reaction spread across much of the continent, Scotland witnessed this phenomenon in microcosm, but fascism failed to gain any real momentum as a political or social force.

In the introduction, it was surmised that the conditions for fascist organisations to grow in Scotland during the inter-war period appeared, at least superficially, favourable. Yet every attempt at establishing fascism in Scotland ended in some level of failure. The groups which emerged during the 1920s can perhaps be put down as false-starts: first laughed off as ‘boy scout fascists’, and then subsumed into government sponsored reaction during the 1926 General Strike. The same can perhaps be said of the New Party, a movement that existed in a transitory phase of Mosley’s politics, while his fascist beliefs were still developing.

However, although not comparable to their counterparts on the continent, the British Union of Fascists did attract a much wider layer of support and, fleetingly, some level of influence. This was not the case in Scotland, though, where their attempts to implant their brand of corporatist fascism failed to adapt to the specific circumstances north of the border. On top of this, Scotland’s cities, with their strong left tradition, were not fertile ground for the fascists, who faced near daily opposition whenever and wherever they tried to operate. The BUF in Scotland had little to offer anyone, whether insecure middle class business owners, lumpen elements or wealthy industrialists. Those attracted to the thrill of street violence or looking for an easy scapegoat for economic and social problems were already well served by the organisations of militant Protestantism. Others, meanwhile, were attracted to Scottish nationalism, an issue which the BUF’s Scottish policy – or rather, lack of – failed to tackle to the extent that breakaway organisations even emerged from the BUF.

Only in the south of Scotland did the organisation manage to imbed itself in the community, but this was still a very limited operation, and while meetings involving Mosley could attract huge crowds, they had little lasting effect. To truly succeed in Scotland, the BUF needed to make an impact in the cities, and from 1936 they began a

concerted campaign in Aberdeen. The sheer level of opposition that they subsequently faced, however, would be their downfall. Their numerical weakness created a situation where they essentially had to rely on the acquiescence of the state to operate; when this fell back, there was no room left to manoeuvre. The anti-fascist strategy of denying the BUF a public platform was, as the testimony of the Aberdeen police force shows, a great success, with the balance of forces meaning it became far easier for the authorities to clamp down on the fascists than anti-fascists.

Militant Protestantism was in many respects close to fascism – sharing a penchant for street violence, victimising of minority groups and ethno-religious supremacism. In fact, the SPL and PA were more successful than the BUF in all three, only serving to undermine the fascists further. As William Weir Gilmour believed when establishing the SDFP, a truly successful fascist party in Scotland would need to take the prevailing anti-Irish and anti-Catholic attitudes that sections of the populace were open to on board, as well as encompassing Scottish nationalist politics. But by the time Gilmour's grouplet emerged, Ratcliffe's SPL had become a runaway success, and any momentum stolen from them. The BUF were both unwilling and unable to go anywhere near the rhetoric of 'no Popery', which was completely alien to their worldview, but a crucial factor in explaining their failure in Scotland.

The failure of the BUF was in a large part due to factors beyond their control, and their own inability to respond to these. The ground for building a movement based on prejudice had already been seized by the time they tried to implant themselves in Scotland; the militant actions of communists, labour movement activists and in Glasgow, many Jewish workers – an often overlooked segment of Scotland's radical past – was enough to finish the job.

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